MARVEL

018

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ORLANDINI
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STAR WARS™ DARTH VADER

BAD GROUND

The Republic is overthrown and the Jedi Order is defeated. Emperor Palpatine rules the galaxy with an iron fist.

Order and security is viciously maintained by Palpatine's apprentice, the fearsome Darth Vader. Vader's fall to the dark side and defeat at the hands of Obi-Wan Kenobi leaves him confined to a suit of cybernetic armor to preserve his life. Now, he lives only to serve his master's Empire.

Chief among Palpatine's military commanders is the cunning Governor Wilhuff Tarkin, whose ruthless efficiency has secured him a powerful position in the new order....

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The Outer Rim.
Chandar's Folly.
AT DAWN, THE HUNT WILL ENTER ITS NINTH DAY.
I BEGAN WITH TWENTY MEN, INCLUDING MYSELF. EIGHT REMAIN.
CONSIDERING OUR QUARRY...
...THIS IS BETTER THAN EXPECTED.
HE'S OUT THERE, TARKIN.
SISSIAN JUST PICKED HIM UP. TO THE NORTHWEST. BUT SOMETHING'S DIFFERENT.
MM? HOW SO, YERGA?
SEE FOR YOURSELF.
HM.

MY PREY.
DARTH VADER.
YOU SAW THE SKIN HE'S WEARING?
YES. TAKEN FROM A VALATH.
THIS PLANET'S APEX PREDATOR, HUGE AND DEADLY, WITH A HIDE BOASTING UNIQUE CHROMATOPHORES THAT ALLOW IT TO BLEND INTO ITS BACKGROUND.
VADER SOMEHOW MANAGED TO KILL ONE--A TASK EVEN I WOULD NOT UNDERTAKE WITHOUT SIGNIFICANT PREPARATION.
AND HE DID IT WITHOUT HIS LIGHTSABER.

THE VALATH SKIN WOULD LET HIM HIDE, IF HE CHOSE TO.
HE WANTS US TO SEE HIM, TO KNOW HE HAS IT.
I AGREE. REALLY STARTING TO HATE THIS GUY.
JUST STARTING, YERGA? I WAS HATING HIM, LIKE, EIGHT DAYS AGO.
IT'S TIME TO MOVE. GIL AND EIGHTY-ONE, TAKE POINT.
SISSIAN, HARDHEAR, STAY ALERT. WITH HIS LOVELY NEW CLOAK, HE COULD COME FROM ANYWHERE. YOUR EARS ARE OUR FIRST LINE OF DEFENSE.
A PROPER HUNT BEGINS IN THE MIND.
ONE MUST TAKE EVERYTHING KNOWN ABOUT THE PREY AND CREATE THE FIRST, MOST ESSENTIAL WEAPON.
A PLAN.

I HAVE BEEN PRIVILEGED TO WATCH VADER AT HIS BLOODY WORK ON MORE THAN ONE OCCASION.
BLASTERS ARE ALMOST USELESS. HE CAN DEFLECT THE BOLTS, WHETHER WITH HIS LIGHTSABER OR HIS COMMAND OF THE FORCE.
THEREFORE, I OUTFITTED MY TEAM WITH FLAME WEAPONS AND SLUGTHROWERS.
ON THE SECOND DAY, WE TRACKED VADER TO A COPSE OF THURIAN TREES, SURROUNDED HIM AND LET LOOSE.
THE FLAMES ENGULFED HIM, AND UNLESS I AM WRONG, I EVEN DETECTED A HINT OF FEAR IN VADER'S BODY LANGUAGE.
AT FIRST, THIS APPROACH SEEMED PROMISING. A LIGHTSABER WILL NOT TURN AWAY FIRE.
BUT ONLY AT FIRST. FLAMES ARE NOT SUSCEPTIBLE TO LIGHTSABERS--SO VADER DID NOT ATTACK THE FLAMES.
KRMP!
HE ATTACKED THE FLAME-THROWERS.
WHAT THE--
WE LOST FOUR HUNTERS THAT DAY.
BUT I LEARNED A GREAT DEAL.
FWS
SH!

VADER IS NOT DIFFICULT TO TRACK.
TRUE, HIS ARMOR IS HEAVY. HE LEAVES SIGN EVERYWHERE HE GOES. MORE IMPORTANTLY, IT IS AS IF HE DOES NOT CARE IF HE IS PURSUED, OR EVEN ATTACKED.
WE LEARNED WHY. REPEATEDLY.
VADER IS ESSENTIALLY A MACHINE. PLODDING, IMPLACABLE.
BUT WHEN HE TAKES LIFE, HE COMES TO LIFE. IN FACT, IT SEEMS THE ONLY REASON HE EXISTS.
IT WAS CLEAR THAT AS LONG AS HE POSSESSED HIS LIGHTSABER, WE HAD NO CHANCE TO TAKE HIM.
THE OPERATION TO RELIEVE VADER OF HIS WEAPON, UNDERTAKEN ON THE FOURTH DAY, COST ME ANOTHER SIX MEN.
WHPP!
I CONSIDERED IT A BARGAIN.
NOT ONLY DID IT FORCE VADER TO ADOPT NEW TACTICS, BUT IT MADE HIM ANGRY. IN GENERAL, ENRAGED PREY IS EASIER TO DESTROY.
I AM...WILLING TO ADMIT THIS ANALYSIS MAY NOT APPLY TO DARTH VADER.
TIME WILL TELL.

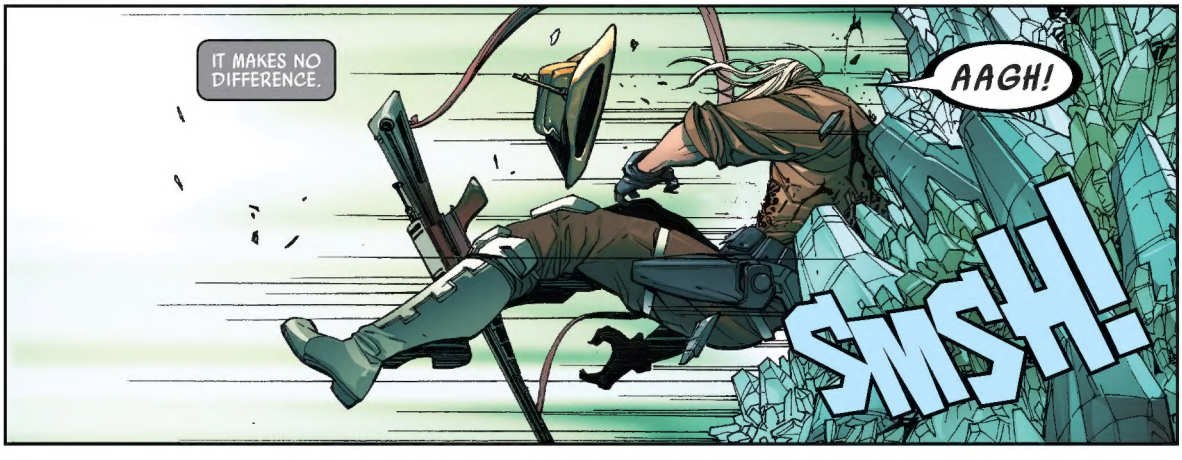
VADER PREFERS THE INTIMACY OF A CLOSE KILL. NOTHING COULD BE MORE OBVIOUS.
KRKK!
BUT IF HE MUST, HE CAN ALSO KILL AT A DISTANCE.
HE CAN USE THE FORCE TO CRUSH HIS VICTIMS' WINDPIPES, BREAK THEIR BONES, PULL THEIR EYES FROM THEIR HEADS.
I AM NO STUDENT OF THIS STRANGE MAGIC. I DID NOT UNDERSTAND ITS LIMITATIONS. I NEEDED TO.
MY LIFE, AND THE SUCCESS OF THE HUNT--ALL DEPENDED ON UNDERSTANDING.
I SENT MORE MEN TO DIE, CHOKING ON THEIR OWN BLOOD, SO I COULD LEARN HOW CLOSE HE NEEDED TO BE TO KILL WITH THE FORCE.
ONCE I ACQUIRED THAT LAST PIECE OF INFORMATION, I BELIEVED THE HUNT WOULD SHORTLY DRAW TO A CLOSE.
I WAS MISTAKEN.
I KNEW VADER'S LIGHTSABER MATTERED TO HIM--IT WAS THE ONLY OBJECT TOWARD WHICH I HAD EVER SEEN HIM DEMONSTRATE EMOTION OF ANY KIND.
IN MEETINGS WITH PALPATINE, ON OCCASION, HE WOULD TOUCH IT, CLEARLY UNAWARE OF HIS ACTIONS.
VADER WANTED--PERHAPS NEEDED--HIS LIGHTSABER BACK. AND SO, AS WE HUNTED HIM...

...HE HUNTED US.
SISSIAN... HARDHEAR. AT THE SLIGHTEST SIGN, SING OUT.
HSSSSHKH... HUUUU...
HNH. DARK DEMON... HE HERE.
MY TWO CHADRA-FAN TRACKERS, HARDHEAR AND HIS GRANDSON SISSIAN, COULD DETECT VADER AT A DISTANCE, BY THE INHUMAN RASP OF HIS BREATHING APPARATUS.
THEY COULD PINPOINT HIS EXACT LOCATION BEFORE WE ENTERED THE RANGE OF HIS FORCE ABILITIES.
THEY WERE THE REASON WE WERE STILL ALIVE.
DIRECTION, HARDHEAR?
I...CAN'T TELL. THIS PLACE... PLACE OF ECHOES.
DARK DEMON... HE...
HSSSSHKH... HUUUU...
...HE ALL AROUND US.
HSSSSHKH... HUUUU...
HSSSSHKH... HUUUU...
HSSSSHKH... HUUUU...
HSSSSHKH... HUUUU...
HSSSSHKH... HUUUU...
HSSSSHKH... HUUUU...
HSSSSHKH... HUUUU...
HSSSSHKH... HUUUU...
HSSSSHKH... HUUUU...
IT IS TIME...

THERE IS NO PANIC. JUST A RACE TO ESCAPE WHAT WE HAVE REALIZED IS A KILL BOX.

BUT IT IS DISCIPLINED. *THERE IS NO PANIC.*

MY HUNTERS ARE GOOD AT WHAT THEY DO. I HIRED WELL.



DID HE LURE US HERE TO A PLACE WHERE MY CHARGE'S FANG AND TIES WOULD BE NEUTRALIZED OR DID HE SIMPLY SEE HIS CHANCE AND TAKE IT?
HARDHEAR!
KK-KKT!
THIS, ALSO, MAKES NO DIFFERENCE.
KRK!
MOVE! WE MUST GET INTO THE OPEN!
FORM UP!

DO YOU HEAR HIM, SISSIAN? IS HE COMING?
I HEAR...

KSSSSHKH... KUUUU...

KSSSSHKH... KUUUU...

GONE. DARK DEMON GONE.

WE DON'T WANT TO GO THIS WAY, TARKIN. NOT UNLESS WE HAVE ZERO CHOICE.
THESE ARE THE *STORMLANDS*. BAD GROUND.
I KNOW WHAT THEY ARE, YERGA. I STUDIED THIS PLANET WELL BEFORE COMING HERE. BUT I'M NOT SURE WE HAVE A CHOICE.

WE CAMP HERE TONIGHT. PERHAPS THE MORNING WILL BRING US AN ANSWER.

SISSIAN. WHAT DO YOU HEAR?

NOTHING, BOSS TARKIN. DARK DEMON NOT OUT THERE.
GOOD. REMAIN VIGILANT.

AND THEN [illegible] THAT QUICK!
KK-KKT!

DEATH IS IN AMONG US.

UP! HE'S *HERE*, YOU FOOLS!

I REALIZE WHAT HE MUST HAVE DONE

VADER DEACTIVATED HIS ARMOR'S BREATHING APPARATUS. I DID NOT KNOW HE COULD.

I HAVE NEVER HEARD HIM WITHOUT IT. I ASSUMED HE NEEDED IT TO SURVIVE.

KRCK!

AND IF THAT IS SO... IF THAT IS THE STRATEGY HE ADOPTED TO GET PAST SUSSIAN'S BARS... THEN HE IS DYING RIGHT NOW. DYING, EVEN AS HE KILLS US.

KTNG! KTNG!

STILL, MY MEN BRACE THEMSELVES, PREPARING TO FIGHT.

DISCIPLINE TO THE LAST.

UNTIL HE GETS HIS LIGHTSABER BACK.

THEN, ONLY TERROR.

WHP!

THE SABER FLIES TO HIS HAND. AND ONLY THEN DOES HE BEGIN TO BREATHE. HE *RETURNS TO LIFE*.

SSK!

THE LAST OF MY MEN ARE ABOUT TO DIE, AND SO, AGAIN.

IT IS TIME TO RUN.

I KNEW HOW FAR AHEAD OF RATTER I MUST REMAIN TO PREVENT HIM FROM KILLING ME WITH THE FORCE.
TWO MEN DIED SO I COULD LEARN THIS. I AM GLAD THEY DID.

ZZCK! ZZCK!
I THROW OUT A FEW DESPERATE SHOTS BEHIND ME. EVEN NOW, IN THIS NIGHTMARE, MY SKILLS DO NOT DESERT ME.
MY AIM IS TRUE.

BUT I HAVE LOST MY SLUGTHROWER, AND HE PUTS THE BOLTS ASIDE.
AS I KNEW HE WOULD.

RATTER DOES NOT HURRY.
EVENTUALLY I WILL TIRE, AND SLOW, AND FAIL TO MAINTAIN A SAFE DISTANCE.

SO WHY PROLONG THE END?
IT IS TIME TO STOP RUNNING.

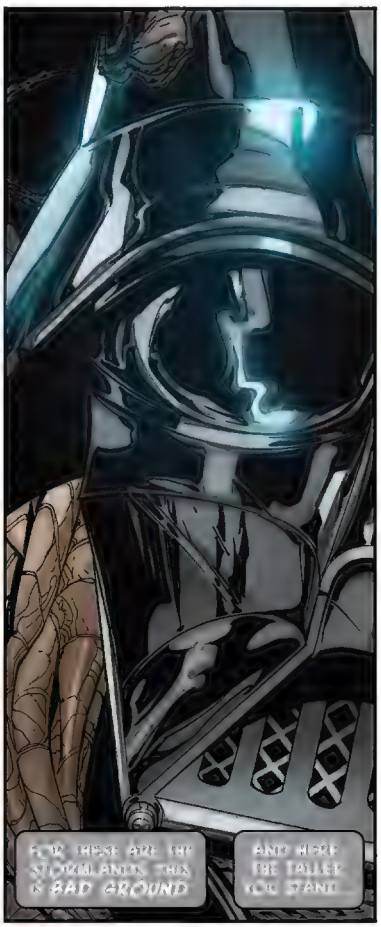
VADER HAS DESTROYED ALL OF THE KILLERS I BROUGHT TO THIS WORLD. I AM THE LAST.
HE HAS WON.

HE KNOWS IT.

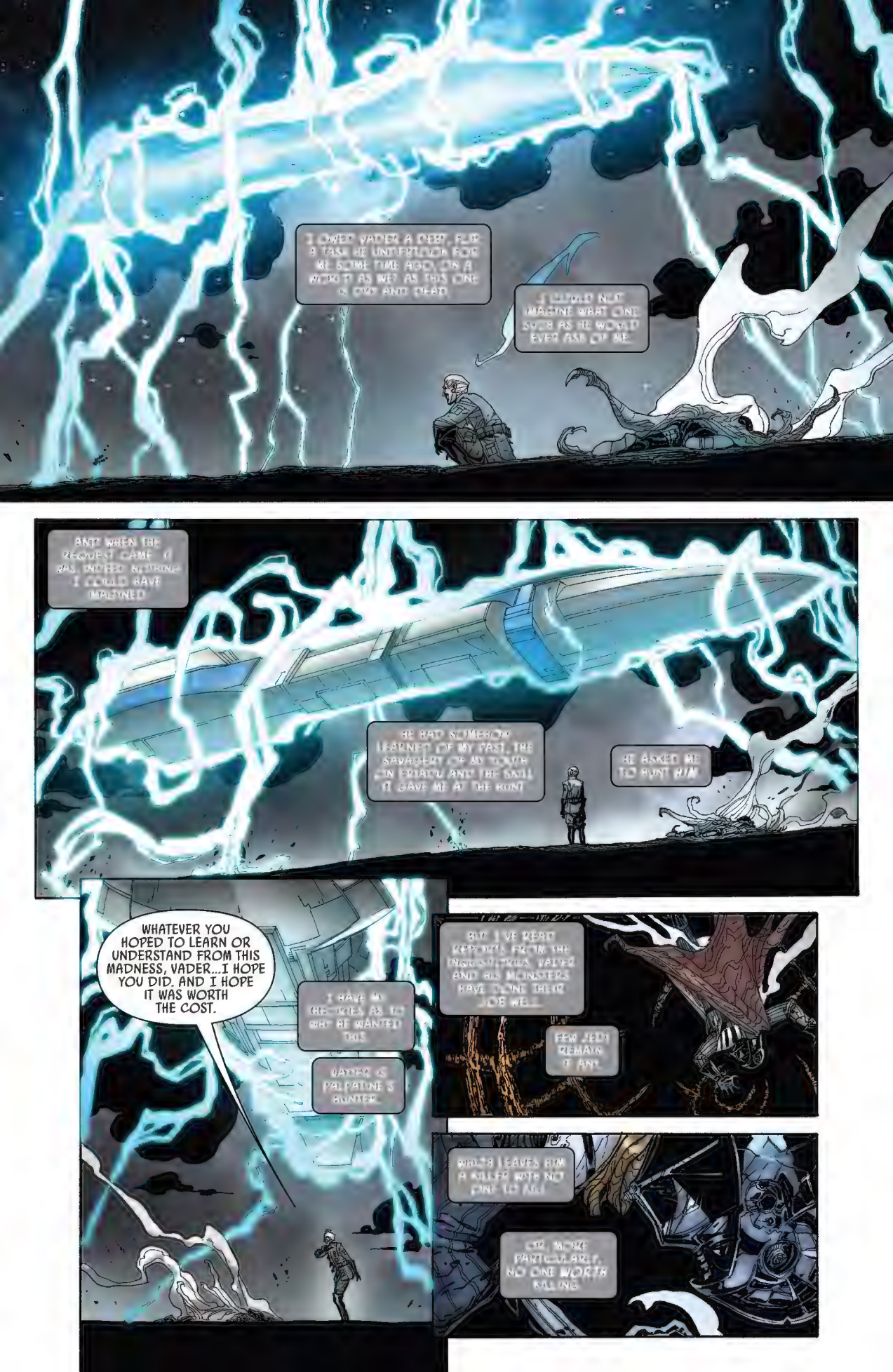
HE SEES THE DEATH HE WILL GIVE ME. HE SEES HIS VICTORY.
HE SEES THE END OF THE HUNT.

SO, NOT.

VADER SAVORS MY IMMINENT MURDER—HE CAN ALREADY FEEL IT. HE WANTS IT.
AND SO HE GOES NOT CONSIDER THE LAND, THE SKIES, THIS PLACE TO WHICH I HAVE LED HIM. ON THIS MOMENT, PLANNED BEFORE THIS HUNT BEGAN.


FOR, THESE ARE THE STORMLANDS. THIS IS BAD GROUND.
AND HERE THE TALLER YOU STAND...

KRRRRRR-
KRCK!
THE GOVERNOR'S NEW PET.
THERE, VADER.
AS WE AGREED.
=KKT=
COME TO MY POSITION, IMMEDIATELY. TWO FOR PICKUP.
ACKNOWLEDGED, GOVERNOR TARKIN. WE'LL BE THERE IN A MOMENT.

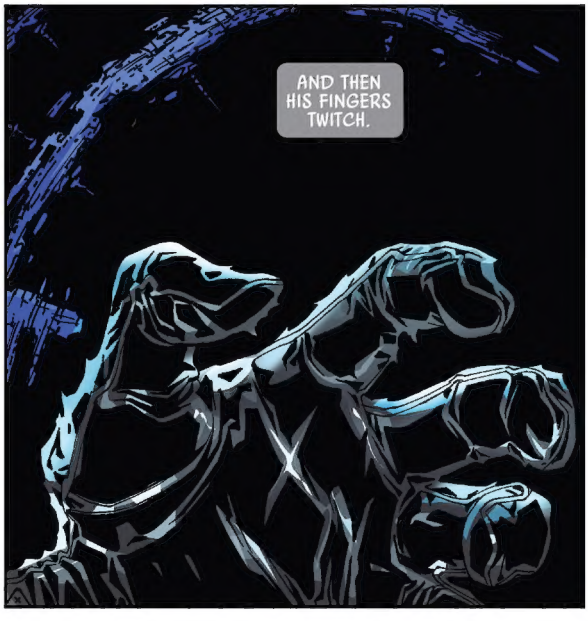

I OWED VADER A DEBT, FOR A TASK HE UNDERTOOK FOR ME SOME TIME AGO, ON A WORLD AS WET AS THIS ONE IS DRY AND DEAD.
I COULD NOT IMAGINE WHAT ONE SUCH AS HE WOULD EVER ASK OF ME.
AND WHEN THE REQUEST CAME, IT WAS, INDEED, NOTHING I COULD HAVE IMAGINED.
HE HAD SOMEHOW LEARNED OF MY PAST, THE SAVAGERY OF MY YOUTH ON KRIFFOW AND THE SKILL IT GAVE ME AT THE HUNT.
HE ASKED ME TO HUNT HIM.
WHATEVER YOU HOPED TO LEARN OR UNDERSTAND FROM THIS MADNESS, VADER...I HOPE YOU DID. AND I HOPE IT WAS WORTH THE COST.
I HAVE MY THEORIES AS TO WHY HE WANTED THIS.
VADER IS PALPATINE'S HUNTER.
BUT I'VE HEARD REPORTS FROM THE INQUISITORIUS. VADER AND HIS MONSTERS HAVE DONE THEIR JOB WELL.
FEW JEDI REMAIN, IF ANY.
WHICH LEAVES HIM A KILLER WITH NO ONE TO KILL.
OR, MORE PARTICULARLY, NO ONE WORTH KILLING.

I COULD BE WRONG ABOUT ALL OF THIS. HE HAS TOLD ME NOTHING, AND I SUSPECT HE NEVER WILL.
ALL I HAVE IS THE REQUEST ITSELF.
KILL ME...IF YOU CAN.

HE WANTED TO KNOW THAT HE COULD STILL BE CHALLENGED. COULD STILL, POSSIBLY, BE BEATEN, EVEN IN A GALAXY DEVOID OF JEDI.
HE CHOSE ME TO PROVE THIS TO HIM.
IT'S ACTUALLY SOMEWHAT FLATTERING.
MY SHIP WILL LAND MOMENTARILY-- WE'LL GET YOU TO A REPAIR BAY.

I REVIEWED ALL I KNEW OF HIM, ALL I HAD HEARD. CONSIDERED AND ABANDONED A THOUSAND STRATEGIES.
IN THE END IT WAS SIMPLE. VADER BELIEVES HE CAN NEVER LOSE.

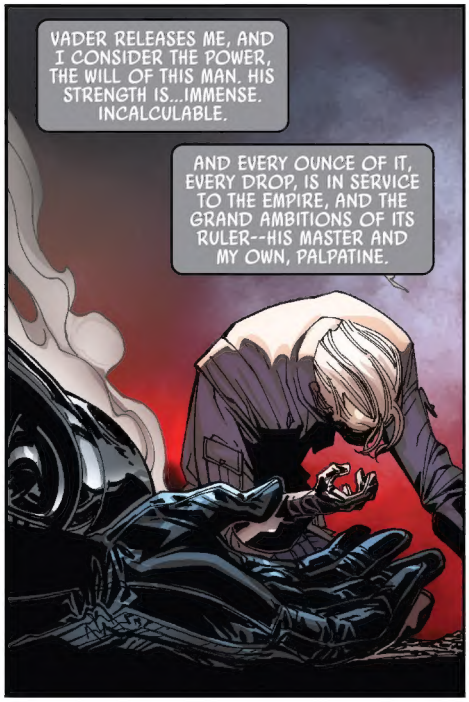
I USED THAT BELIEF TO SHOW HIM HE CAN.

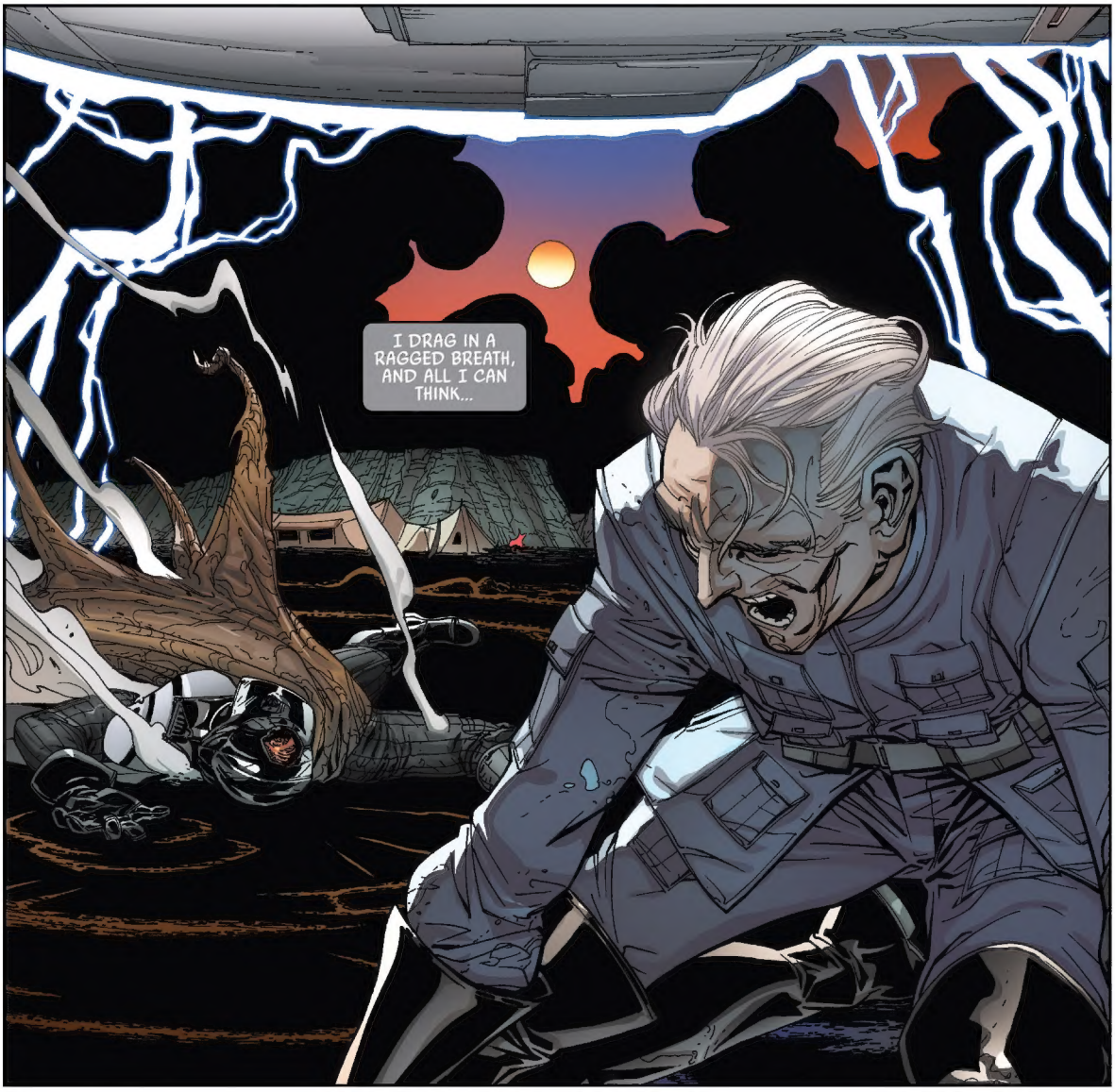

AND THEN HIS FINGERS TWITCH.

AND I REALIZE THAT IN VADER'S MIND, HE HAS *NOT* LOST.
HKK--

AS I FALL TO MY KNEES AGAIN, THIS TIME NOT AS PART OF A RUSE, BUT BECAUSE HIS ICY, INVISIBLE HANDS ON MY NECK HAVE STOLEN MY STRENGTH...

...I REALIZE WE ARE BOTH TO LEARN LESSONS THIS DAY.


VADER RELEASES ME, AND I CONSIDER THE POWER, THE WILL OF THIS MAN. HIS STRENGTH IS...IMMENSE. INCALCULABLE.
AND EVERY OUNCE OF IT, EVERY DROP, IS IN SERVICE TO THE EMPIRE, AND THE GRAND AMBITIONS OF ITS RULER--HIS MASTER AND MY OWN, PALPATINE.


I DRAG IN A RAGGED BREATH, AND ALL I CAN THINK...

...IS HOW LUCKY WE ARE.
DARTH VADER Continues Next Month With "Fortress Vader" Part I!

DARTH VADER
NEXT ISSUE:
after TOM JUNG